

# *A Journal of the Plague Year*

Adapted from Daniel Defoe's Book

by Steven Key Meyers

*For Kevin John Bueche  
(1957-1993)*

*A Journal of the Plague Year*

*(See Author's Note following text for sources.)*

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

Doubling scheme / Order of appearance

I. FIDDLER  
E. MARTINDALE  
A. HARRY FOE  
D. TYDINGS  
G. MRS. ASH  
F. JUDITH  
C. JOHN SELKIRK  
H. ASH DAUGHTER  
B. HEATH  
E. WILLIAM FOE  
D. SOLOMON EAGLE  
C. VICTIM  
H. MRS. TYDINGS  
E. GOOD TYDINGS  
F. MOTHER SELKIRK  
G. ESTHER SELKIRK  
E. DICK SELKIRK  
F. QUACK

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C. CHARMSELLER  
E. COSTERMONGER  
C. SIR JOHN LAWRENCE  
D. EXAMINER  
F. ASH WATCHMAN  
C. ASH  
C. MARTINDALE WATCHMAN  
H. MRS. MARTINDALE  
G. NURSE  
B. BUCKINGHAM  
H. SHOPPER  
F. ABRAHAM'S WIDOW  
E. THOMAS MOLINS  
G. BURIER  
F. SEXTON  
D. CAPTAIN DAVIS  
E. LIMPING MAN  
D. PICK  
E. ROBERT  
G. RACHEL

SCENE AND TIME

A marketplace in London's Whitechapel, May to December of 1665. FOE's house and saddlery (with standing-desk) to one side, TYDINGS' elevated garret to other. ASH and MARTINDALE houses, center.

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AT RISE, FIDDLER—improvising on 17th-century dance rhythms throughout—accompanies JUDITH, MRS. ASH and ASH DAUGHTER dancing with silks. FOE, polishing a saddle, converses with TYDINGS.

Enter MARTINDALE.

MARTINDALE

Mr. Foe? They've disturbed my wife, and she's with child.

FOE [waving FIDDLER to silence]

Sorry, Mr. Martindale.

TYDINGS

How many does this one make, Mr. Martindale?

MARTINDALE

Ten, Mr. Tydings— Ten, indeed, unless—

[Counts on fingers.]

Eleven? I'll ask my wife.

[Exits.]

TYDINGS

Better if his wife did more dancing and less—

[Gestures lewdly. To FIDDLER's  
mocking *Ring Around A-Rosy*, MRS.]

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ASH, ASH DAUGHTER and  
JUDITH dance around TYDINGS.]

*Ring Around A-Rosy* when the plague is coming?

[Music stops. To FOE:]

Back to business. Selkirk's ship can carry your horse tack out and sugar back for me. The rate for us together will be cheap.

MRS. ASH

Sorry, Mr. Foe, but this woman's goods put us in a mind to dance.

FOE

What kind of goods?

JUDITH

Silks for your wife, sir.

TYDINGS

His *what*?

MRS. ASH

She'll not catch that old bachelor.

FOE

I am a single man, madam.

JUDITH

Your mistress, then. Smooth Levantine silks. Don't tell me your mistress doesn't want a yard? Every woman likes a yard or two.

TYDINGS

Will she take a saddle in exchange?

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MRS. ASH

He'll get the softer mount.

JUDITH

I have some—very choice, very rare—that I can show in privacy.  
Feel this one—

[Enshrouds FOE in silk. HE sneezes.  
COMPANY flinches.]

But you have work to do. Mistress Ash, you liked the green?

MRS. ASH

Indeed, madam, if you'll come across.

TYDINGS

As I was saying: Selkirk can ship—

FOE

You expect no stop to business?

[Enter JOHN SELKIRK, waving  
bill.]

TYDINGS

Expecting the worst brings on the worst, that is my experience.  
Speak of the devil.

FOE

Selkirk, you have it? Well?

JOHN SELKIRK

The bill for this week:

[Reads:]

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Deaths, three hundred and forty-two, whereof the plague: seventy-one!

TYDINGS

How many parishes infected?

JOHN SELKIRK

Twelve: Clerkenwell—

JUDITH

Twelve!

JOHN SELKIRK

—Shoreditch, Bishopsgate—

MRS. ASH

Shoreditch? Draws this way from Drury Lane, then.

FOE

Man, what of St. Giles Cripplegate?

JOHN SELKIRK

St. Giles: Deaths, eighteen, whereof the plague: *one*.

FOE

One in our parish!

MRS. ASH

One of our neighbors!

TYDINGS

One only. Still mostly in the west. We're safe here.

JOHN SELKIRK

Though I'll have nothing to do with Shoreditch.

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TYDINGS

Or go up Drury Lane—unless upon business.

FOE

I don't know what to do.

TYDINGS

I've no time to anticipate. Selkirk, about that ship—

JOHN SELKIRK

Yes, Tydings—later.

[Exit apart.]

JUDITH [pointing]

Ohh! I see it plain! Ohh!

MRS. ASH

What is it?

FOE

What do you see?

JUDITH

An angel in the sky, clothed in white, a sword of fire in his hand.

MRS. ASH

I see him! He brandishes it over our heads.

ASH DAUGHTER

The sword's plain as can be.

JUDITH

What a glorious face he has!



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MRS. ASH

A beautiful face!

FOE

Where? Where do you see him?

JUDITH

Right above. Can you not see?

FOE

No.

ASH DAUGHTER [to MRS. ASH]

What does it mean, Mother?

JUDITH

The meaning of it is, there shall be such a plague in London, the living will not be able to bury the dead! He signs now to the houses. To that house!

[Points at FOE's house.]

The sign of death has been placed on that house.

[HEATH enters, carrying bill.]

Now to the ground.

ASH DAUGHTER

What does that mean, Mother?

JUDITH

That hundreds—thousands—will be buried in that churchyard.

MRS. ASH

I see coffins waiting to be buried! Heaps of dead bodies!

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ASH DAUGHTER

Heaps!

JUDITH

Dead! All dead!

[JUDITH, MRS. ASH and ASH  
DAUGHTER exit.]

FOE

I see — a cloud, bright on one side by the shining of the sun.

HEATH [startling FOE]

*So hypochondriac fancies represent  
Ships, armies, battles in the firmament,  
Till steady eyes the exhalations solve,  
And all to its first matter — cloud — resolve.*

FOE

Heath!

HEATH

Have you seen the bill?

FOE

Neighbor Selkirk brought it.

HEATH

It has reached the parish. Time you went to the country.

WILLIAM FOE [entering, waving bill]

Harry, my brother, I've got to talk to you —

FOE

William! Come in with Doctor Heath.

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SOLOMON EAGLE [off]

Great, most dreadful God!

[Almost naked spotted VICTIM  
runs on screaming, dies  
grotesquely. SOLOMON EAGLE—  
a plant sprouting from HIS head—  
follows, circles body.]

FOE

Is it—?

HEATH

Yes. Stay off him.

FOE

But Christian mercy—

HEATH

Nothing can be done.

WILLIAM FOE

Stay off, Harry!

FOE

How do you know it's—?

HEATH

By the mad plunge to outrun the agony.

SOLOMON EAGLE

Oh, the great and the dreadful God! Repent your sins! Repent!

FOE

Stay off me, you crazy Quaker!

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SOLOMON EAGLE

Dreadful God!

[Toes VICTIM, at a loss exits.]

WILLIAM FOE

Your first, Harry?

FOE

Yes.

WILLIAM FOE

I saw them in the East—too many of them.

FOE

Did you see the way he kicked?

WILLIAM FOE

Tomorrow I leave for Lincolnshire.

HEATH

Good.

WILLIAM FOE

Brother, come with me. Do not await it here.

FOE

Did you hear the way he screamed?

WILLIAM FOE [producing pamphlet]

Have you looked into *Gadbury's Astrological Predictions*?

HEATH

How can the alignment of planets cause disease?

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WILLIAM FOE [producing pamphlet]

Have you read *Come Out of Her, My People, Lest You Partake of Her Plagues?*

HEATH

Did you see that man die? Saddlers are not wanted here.

WILLIAM FOE

Though physicians are.

FOE

All my property in the world is embarked in my business.

HEATH

What is that to saving your life?

FOE

Does not fear make what's coming worse?

WILLIAM FOE

With London ripe for destruction? The king's restored, the city's rich, luxurious and gay. Harry, the one sure preparation is to run away.

HEATH

Foe: The sole antidote is compounded of three adverbs: *Cito, Longe, Tarde*— Fly quickly, go far, return slowly.

WILLIAM FOE

You are with me?

HEATH

Completely.

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FOE

But if I flee the Lord's presence—

HEATH

Not His presence: His plague.

FOE

I should trust in God with my health.

WILLIAM FOE

Come with me, Harry.

FOE

I have no horse, and 'tis too late to get one.

WILLIAM FOE

I have a horse. I have a cart.

FOE

I did direct my servant to prepare my journey and he—left me.

HEATH

An intimation from heaven!

FOE

Then I arranged with a woman in my trade to take over my affairs  
and—

WILLIAM FOE

And?

FOE

She fell ill.

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HEATH

Providence!

FOE

I should take my lot where God has placed me.

WILLIAM FOE

In the East I saw the Turks presume upon your notion that every man's end is beforehand decreed. Saw them stay in infected places, converse with infected persons—

FOE

Did you?

WILLIAM FOE

—and die by the heaps. Whereas I, who kept retired and reserved, escaped.

FOE

He can preserve me in the midst of danger.

HEATH

When contagion spreads from the sick to the well?

FOE

No, no, 'tis a stroke from heaven.

HEATH

Not a stroke without the agency of means.

FOE

Heath, you talk like an atheist.

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HEATH

Even if the plague be the will of God, 'tis under the conduct of human causes, human effects, and has its specific agent. Everybody receives the infection through secret conveyance after intercourses with the infected. Nor can caution prevent it spreading: Impossible to tell infected people from sound, or that the infected can themselves know, for no symptoms appear until a fit time of maturity.

FOE

“Specific agent”?

HEATH

Stems or fumes we call effluvia. They penetrate the blood, mingling with it and raising the tokens.

FOE

“Tokens”?

HEATH

Spots like flea bites, or larger ones that cover the body, or — the buboes.

FOE

“Buboes”?

WILLIAM FOE

Ghastly, Harry. Ghastly.

HEATH

Swellings in the neck and secret places of armpit and groin. Knobs that cause such pain men leap roaring out of windows.

WILLIAM FOE

I still hear them, Harry — screams and ravings.



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FOE

And the course of the disease?

HEATH

It begins with cold shivering like an ague,

[FOE shivers]

then shuddering like burning fever.

[FOE shudders.]

Sweat breaks out as if the body would dissolve. It makes feeble like the palsy, causes madness like the frenzy, and death like a flash of lightning.

WILLIAM FOE

Brother, are you all right?

FOE

But you can treat it?

HEATH

If there are tokens, we cut them, lance them, burn them with caustics—

FOE

A cure?

HEATH

If they can be brought to a head, the patient may recover. But many more poor creatures we torture to death.

WILLIAM FOE

Well, Harry?

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FOE

They say it seizes men with the urge to infect others.

HEATH

When men are unconcerned for their own safety, they are careless of others. But purposely communicate the venom? I do not grant the fact.

FOE

William, give me till tomorrow to consider?

WILLIAM FOE

You will resolve?

FOE

I will resolve.

[WILLIAM FOE exits.]

Heath, do you go to the country?

HEATH

No, no, I stay in the city. But you should go.

[Exits.]

FOE

I know not what to do. Lord, you direct me!

[Kneels, pages through Bible, at random reads Psalm 91:]

“He shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with His feathers and under His wings shalt thou trust. Ten thousand shall fall at thy

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side, but because thou hast made the Lord thy habitation, no plague shall come nigh thy dwelling.”

[Closes Bible.]

You are my refuge, Lord: I shall stay where I dwell.

[Rises, at desk writes rapidly.]

“It was about the beginning of September 1664 that I, among the rest of my neighbors, heard that the plague was returned again in Holland. Some said it was brought from Africa, others from the Levant among Turkish goods. It seems the Government knew of it, but kept all private and hushed. Hence this rumor died off and people forgot it, as a thing we were little concerned in—” No—

[scratches paper, writes]

“—as a thing that concerned us not—” No—

[scratches, writes:]

“—as a thing we hoped was not true”—*yes*—“till two men died in Drury Lane. The Lord Mayor ordered physicians to make inspection. Finding tokens upon the bodies, they gave their opinion that they died of the plague. Whereupon it was printed in the next weekly bill of mortality: Plague, two. Parishes infected, one.”

[Continues writing.

TYDINGS enters where sit MRS.  
TYDINGS and GOOD TYDINGS.]

MRS. TYDINGS

Come, Good, another dainty?

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TYDINGS [waving bill]

Mrs. Tydings, our foreign guest has arrived in the parish. We must prepare.

MRS. TYDINGS

We were just talking of it.

GOOD TYDINGS

Yes, sir, they say—

TYDINGS

I have considered whether to stay or go or what. When the bills overtop one thousand a week dead of it—

GOOD TYDINGS

One thousand a week!

MRS. TYDINGS

'Tisn't possible!

TYDINGS

—we will shut ourselves up with all we need for a year.

GOOD TYDINGS

A year!

MRS. TYDINGS

Cannot we go to the country?

GOOD TYDINGS

Let's go to the country, Father.

TYDINGS [preparing quill at table]

To meet the plague there? As to my preparations: silence. If our neighbors Foe or Martindale or Ash learn I am hoarding, then

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when they starve of their own improvidence— I am writing as for my trade, to have supplies taken roundabout into my warehouse before bringing them privately here.

MRS. TYDINGS

What supplies?

TYDINGS [writing]

I will buy a thousandweight of sea-biscuit bread, put up in hogsheads as for a long voyage.

MRS. TYDINGS

Sea-biscuit bread?

TYDINGS

And what is wrong with sea-biscuit bread?

GOOD TYDINGS

So coarse and uneatable.

TYDINGS

Nonetheless you will eat it: It keeps. However—in addition, I shall get ten barrels of fine flour, packed up as though for Jamaica.

MRS. TYDINGS

Fine flour. Good, I shall bake cakes—

TYDINGS

We cannot live on cakes.

[Writes:]

A fat bullock's flesh pickled. Two barrels thus of pork. Three hundred pound-weight of cheeses: Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, and old Cheshire. Twelve firkins of salt butter. Salt, pickles, neats'

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tongues, hams, ten stone bottles of oil. Coals, gunpowder, eighty dozen pounds of candles. And medicines: mithridate, Venice treacle, diachylin, *et cetera*.

MRS. TYDINGS

Medicines?

TYDINGS

I'll dig a well in the yard, that we can daily wash every room in the house, and I'll poison the rats and mice and kill our cats and dogs.

[MRS. TYDINGS cries out.]

With due preparations we shall survive—if I am in time to avoid scarcities. I think I am.

MRS. TYDINGS

Do not forget our other needs, husband.

TYDINGS

Other needs?

[Snaps fingers.]

Beer! Say eighteen barrels, well hopped. Not for mirth, son.

GOOD TYDINGS

Oh no, sir, but the physicians order us not to let our spirits sink.

TYDINGS [writing]

Well, and two casks of malmsey, a barrel of malaga sack, two runlets of brandy, and one of this new cordial they call plague water. A most sufficient magazine. I shall bolt and bind and lock us up—even close the chimneys but this one.

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[Climbs to garret, calling:]

And install a pulley to let down victuals to the porter he can trust to eat, and his wages, and he shall tell us how it goes with the city.

MRS. TYDINGS [calling]

But always to stay inside?

GOOD TYDINGS [calling]

Nothing to do but watch outdoors?

TYDINGS

Watch outdoors? I will nail our casements shut, except this one, which I will cover with tin that nothing infectious can stick. And this one I shall open only after causing a flash of gunpowder to purify the air coming in. And once we are in, if you offer to stir but a foot outside the door, you shall not come in again. For we shall survive!

GOOD TYDINGS

I have never before seen my father show fear.

MRS. TYDINGS

He is not afraid, Good! Don't say such a thing!

[Calling:]

Mr. Tydings? Let us not neglect our souls. Let us place our trust in the Lord.

[Screams as TYDINGS sets off  
FLASH of gunpowder, opens  
window amidst smoke.]

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TYDINGS

An excellent idea, Mrs. Tydings!

[Closes window.

JOHN SELKIRK, holding bill,  
paces while MOTHER SELKIRK  
and ESTHER SELKIRK read  
missals, DICK SELKIRK looks on.]

JOHN SELKIRK

We must bethink ourselves of what 'tis prudent to do while we  
have time.

MOTHER SELKIRK

John Selkirk, time has value only so as we prepare for the soul's  
eternal welfare. That time, once slipped away, is lost forever.

ESTHER SELKIRK

Forever.

MOTHER SELKIRK

Son, you cannot remember the old plagues: In 1635 there died ten  
thousand, in 1624 above fifty thousand.

DICK SELKIRK

Dreadful, those old times.

MOTHER SELKIRK

Dreadful for those whose eternal state was not secured.

ESTHER SELKIRK

If we fall on our knees together like the people of Ninevah, surely  
God will repent Him of His anger!



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MOTHER SELKIRK

I do not expect it. Things were never worse than now, such debauchery loose among us. "Shall I not visit for these things?" saith the Lord."

ESTHER SELKIRK

Jeremiah, chapter nine, verse nine.

DICK SELKIRK

The world was as wicked since I remember it.

ESTHER SELKIRK

Your "words seemed to them as idle tales." Luke twenty-four, verse eleven.

JOHN SELKIRK

You make your company melancholy, madam, always harping on this subject.

MOTHER SELKIRK

In 1624 I was full of mirth as you are now, when on a sudden it broke out and turned our smiles to—

JOHN SELKIRK

It came without warning?

MOTHER SELKIRK

Oh no, we had warning, but we were young and when people spoke of repenting, we thought them melancholy.

DICK SELKIRK

Might do some good in London. Thin the rabble.

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JOHN SELKIRK [putting bill away]

I suppose 'tis always in one part or another of the city. Besides, everybody is willing to hope they will escape.

MOTHER SELKIRK

Every soldier hopes not to be hit, but puts on his helmet that he may fare the better if he is. Take my word, when it comes you'll say 'tis a time to tremble at, a time to be prepared *for*, not a time to prepare *in*.

JOHN SELKIRK

One only dead in St. Giles, and that doubtful.

MOTHER SELKIRK

When the bill sets down one for plague, eight or ten are dead of it, for people conceal it. 'Tis of utmost consequence not to be known to be infected, for they would not be shunned or have their shops shunned.

JOHN SELKIRK

What, madam, would you have us do?

MOTHER SELKIRK

We must prepare for a dreadful visitation. We must prepare for death.

JOHN SELKIRK

I might send you and Esther to the country. And Dick.

ESTHER SELKIRK

I will prepare for death as if I was actually infected.

DICK SELKIRK [pointing]

Nay, sister, you have it already! I see the tokens upon you!

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[ESTHER SELKIRK cries out.]

JOHN SELKIRK

Oh for God's sake—

MOTHER SELKIRK

How can you be so cruel?

DICK SELKIRK

She said she was not frightened at the plague, but only at not being prepared.

ESTHER SELKIRK

Because I am not prepared, I was surprised. But from this hour I look upon myself as infected.

MOTHER SELKIRK

So must we all! Oh, that it frightened the whole nation into the same resolution!

JOHN SELKIRK

This is enough to scare us all to death.

[Exits.

FOE writes. Enter JUDITH.]

JUDITH

Silks for your wife, sir?

FOE

I am a single man, madam.

JUDITH

Your mistress, then? Every woman likes a yard or two.

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FOE

I have no mistress, madam.

JUDITH

No?

FOE

Another time.

JUDITH

Why not this time?

FOE

I don't know.

JUDITH

I'm sound. Try your luck. I'll try mine.

FOE

I could lose.

JUDITH

Or you could win—me.

FOE

Only to lose you, perhaps.

JUDITH

Another time you might lose me. Why not win me this time?

FOE

Because inside of me is a place black with a kind of plague—

[JUDITH backs away.]

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I don't mean that, I'm sound. Only, my heart is discouraged and alone and in the dark—

JUDITH [advancing]

Mine too.

[Pause.]

FOE

I have work to do, madam.

[Exit JUDITH. FOE writes.]

“Like a storm cloud, it now moved eastward towards where I lived. People picked up what they could and fled, the more hastily for the rumor that the government was placing barriers on the roads. Terrors led people running also to fortune-tellers and quacking philosophers who sold ridiculous, useless stuff, their infallible preventive pills—”

QUACK

Infallible preventive pills against the plague! The universal remedy for the universal plague, too late for some— but not too late for you.

[MRS. ASH and ASH DAUGHTER  
listen to QUACK as FOE and  
HEATH enter, joined by  
CHARMSELLER,  
COSTERMONGER and TYDINGS.]

HEATH [holding bill]

Foe, this week's bill must persuade you to go while still you may.

FOE

'Tis my duty to stay where I dwell.

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HEATH

Madness! And you, Tydings?

[Hands bill to TYDINGS, who reads  
it, puts in pocket.]

TYDINGS

Perhaps I shall, business drags so. People would rather crowd into church than eat, though a sneeze or bad smell — the smallest fart — spreads such panic as instantly to clear St. Paul's.

[CHARMSELLER farts. COMPANY  
scatters, glaring at TYDINGS.]

How much do you suppose this charlatan gets?

QUACK

Mine's true plague water, the royal antidote against infection. My black art cured multitudes last year in Amsterdam —

HEATH

How will you eat?

FOE

The God who gave me brains will give me food.

HEATH

Man, at the least lay in provisions: Bake your own bread, brew your own beer — and keep within doors.

FOE

That will keep me safe?

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HEATH [handing herbs]

'Tis the utmost you can do. If you must come out, keep garlic or licorice in your mouth.

QUACK

Incomparable drink against the plague, never found out before—

FOE

Stay in? Not see how the city's faring?

TYDINGS [to QUACK]

Tell me what will become of me?

COSTERMONGER

Will my master keep me? Or leave me to starve?

CHARMSELLER [accosting HEATH]

These cheats spread fear. The authorities should ban them.

HEATH

Perhaps. But it despises medicine. We physicians go about prescribing till we drop down dead.

QUACK

My tinctures will keep you safe! They contain copper, silver and Benzoar stone of the East!

CHARMSELLER

Strange that she omits gold, but that I believe she reserves for her own pockets.

QUACK

I help the poor gratis. That's right, gratis for the poor. Line up there.

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[Points to FOE:]

You, sir, right this way.

TYDINGS

I came up first!

QUACK

Wait your turn.

[To FOE:]

This way, sir.

MRS. ASH

You say you help the poor for nothing?

QUACK

My advice I give for nothing — but not my medicine.

TYDINGS

You lay a snare then, advising the poor gratis to buy your physick.

CHARMSELLER

So does every shopkeeper.

QUACK [to FOE]

Sir, you may come up.

[TYDINGS gives coin, takes bottle,  
exits.]

MRS. ASH

Here now, he's got his, I want mine.



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CHARMSELLER [to FOE and HEATH]

You don't want that quack, sirs — petty unperforming thief, bad as the men.

FOE

A disgrace.

CHARMSELLER

At a time when any of us might be tossed into the common grave, what we want is the true antidote.

FOE

You mean place our faith in Him—

CHARMSELLER [producing charm]

That's it: A proven amulet, a charm to keep it off. See the holy *Abracadabra*, the letters forming a pyramid up even to the "A"?

FOE

You should think of your grave, not your purse!

CHARMSELLER

Same to you!

[HEATH laughs. CHARMSELLER searches SELF.]

MRS. ASH

What do you laugh at?

FOE

Nothing. We didn't laugh.

ASH DAUGHTER

I saw you laugh, scoffers.

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FOE

No, we did not.

ASH DAUGHTER

Profane fellows!

[Enter SOLOMON EAGLE.]

MRS. ASH

If you're infected, buy your own physick! I won't share mine.

[To SOLOMON EAGLE:]

Stay off them!

ASH DAUGHTER

They have it!

SOLOMON EAGLE

They have it! 'Tis a judgment! Great and dreadful God!

FOE

We do not have it – We're sound as you are!

[HEATH hustles FOE across.]

CHARMSELLER [accosting THEM]

If you're papist, this Jesuit cross –

FOE

To hell with your trumpery!

HEATH [grabbing CHARMSELLER's  
sleeve]

The tokens! Surely to yourself you admit your lies?

– A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR –

[CHARMSELLER runs off.]

People! Don't throw money away on whimsies, but go home, avoid adventurous conduct –

FOE

Come, Heath.

MRS. ASH

Whimsies, he calls them!

COSTERMONGER

You're their rival, ain't you, Doctor Heath?

HEATH

Don't take poison for physick, death instead of life!

COSTERMONGER

You're sick and would infect us!

[COMPANY pelts HEATH and  
FOE with vegetables.]

MRS. ASH

Unbeliever! *You're* the quack!

COSTERMONGER

You don't know! Who will keep us alive?

ASH DAUGHTER

Atheist! Blasphemer!

SOLOMON EAGLE

Great and dreadful God! God, God, God!

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

[Bell tolls. Enter SIR JOHN  
LAWRENCE.]

FOE

As well talk to an east wind, Heath.

SIR JOHN LAWRENCE

Whereas King James gave authority to his Lord Mayor to appoint officers for prevention of infection and relief of those infected, I now order: That examiners be appointed to inquire what persons be sick, and to shut up their houses. That the master of every house, as soon as any one complaineth of blotch or swelling, shall notify the examiner within two hours. That every infected house be shut up for twenty-eight days and marked with a red cross, and each to have a watchman, and that examiners pass the streets holding a red wand three foot in length, evident to be seen. And if any appointed examiner refuse to serve, he shall be committed to prison. That all dogs and cats be killed

[outcry]

and that causes of assembly as rope-dances, bear-baitings and plays be prohibited. May God be with us.

COMPANY

May God be with us.

[Exit SIR JOHN LAWRENCE,  
HEATH, SOLOMON EAGLE and  
QUACK.]

FOE goes to desk as MRS. ASH  
and ASH DAUGHTER clean up  
stage.]

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

ASH DAUGHTER

The town was that quiet when the Lord Mayor spoke, Mother, it had the face of a Sabbath day.

MRS. ASH

A Sabbath better observed than it used to be. What is it, child?

ASH DAUGHTER

A pimple, Mother. I have a pimple on my breast.

MRS. ASH

Sir John's measures will suffice if the poor do not rise up. Still, I am glad of this tonic.

[ASH DAUGHTER vomits.]

Child! What ails you?

ASH DAUGHTER

Oh, my head! My head suddenly aches! Is it—?

MRS. ASH

Don't be silly. Come in.

[Stealthily takes ASH DAUGHTER into ASH house. Screams and cries ensue.]

No! No! Dear God, save us! Husband!

[ASH WATCHMAN and EXAMINER enter, EXAMINER briefly going into ASH house.]

– A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR –

EXAMINER

Shut them up, watchman. Twenty-eight days. Unfortunate people, I found evidence of the plague.

ASH WATCHMAN

Yes, sir!

[EXAMINER exits as ASH  
WATCHMAN nails cross to door.]

MRS. ASH [at door]

Watchman, 'tis only a child who's ill, and her you may take to the pest house.

ASH WATCHMAN

You know I may not. The examiner has shut up this house.

MRS. ASH

But shut us up and she'll infect us all!

ASH WATCHMAN

I have my instructions.

[FOE notices altercation. Enter  
MRS. TYDINGS.]

ASH

We are sound people here, yet he shuts us up!

MRS. TYDINGS

What! Watchman, let them out!

COSTERMONGER

Why do you imprison sound people?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MRS. TYDINGS

At this rate we may all be shut away.

COSTERMONGER

Open the house!

ASH WATCHMAN

Nay, I have my instructions.

ASH

Good people, help us. Good neighbor Foe, bring us an axe! Mrs. Tydings, help us.

MRS. ASH

Ten shillings for an axe!

ASH

A pound for two minutes' use of an axe!

COSTERMONGER

An axe! An axe!

ASH WATCHMAN

Get back! This house harbors the plague!

[COSTERMONGER and MRS.  
TYDINGS exit. FOE returns to  
desk.]

MRS. ASH

But my children! My children are in here!

ASH

You don't care! Leave us here to die? You'll die too! Every one of you! 'Tis the end to London!

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MRS. ASH

The devil's taken London! God save us.

[HEATH and EXAMINER emerge  
from MARTINDALE house.]

HEATH

I tell you, this distemper is something else. You have no right to shut up this house.

EXAMINER

Not alone the right, but the sworn duty. Watchman, shut it up.

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

Yes, sir!

[Nails cross to door.]

HEATH

The only one not well in the Martindale house was the prentice, and he only had fever, and now he is well again.

EXAMINER

I hope we are in time to staunch the infection from spreading.

HEATH

There can be no spreading, because there is no infection!

MARTINDALE [at door]

Doctor Heath, what is your judgment?

HEATH

Sir, the threat is less to your health than to your patience. This officious gentleman insists upon shutting you up—



—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

EXAMINER

My clear duty—I do not say a happy one—

HEATH

You see how it lies.

EXAMINER

Duty done satisfies everyone.

[Exits.]

MRS. MARTINDALE

For how long?

HEATH

Twenty-eight days, Mrs. Martindale.

MARTINDALE

Well, we have food. Might be safer, shut away.

MRS. MARTINDALE

We will make shift.

[HEATH exits.

TYDINGS opens window with  
FLASH of gunpowder.]

TYDINGS [calling]

Abraham. Abraham! I am shutting up now. Stay at my door and I shall let down your food every day and wages on Saturday.

[Closes window, carries bill  
downstairs.]

Madam, this week's bill: Burials last week—

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MRS. TYDINGS

I heard it was going off.

TYDINGS

In Aldgate, Stepney, Whitechapel—

GOOD TYDINGS

Please, Father.

TYDINGS

This fourteenth of July the bill amounts to one thousand, seven hundred and sixty-two—

GOOD TYDINGS

Whereof—?

TYDINGS

Better ask, whereof *not*? Fifteen hundred dead of plague! Doubled in one week!

MRS. TYDINGS

The authorities have the situation in hand, Mr. Tydings, shutting up houses and—

TYDINGS

Mistress Tydings, the—plague—is—begun!

MRS. TYDINGS

Yes, Mr. Tydings, but let me go out, there is one thing I must do.

TYDINGS [going upstairs]

By all means, but who goes out now may not return.

GOOD TYDINGS

Mother, he cannot treat us thus.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MRS. TYDINGS

He thinks it best, Good.

GOOD TYDINGS

Have you tasted sea-biscuit bread?

MRS. TYDINGS

Sailors eat it.

GOOD TYDINGS

We are not sailors, nor are we infected: We are shut up causelessly.

TYDINGS [calling]

I will take no chances. None. If I have anything to do with it, we shall survive.

[Opens window with FLASH of gunpowder, MRS. TYDINGS screaming. Peers out, closes window.]

ASH

Watchman. Watchman!

ASH WATCHMAN

Yo.

ASH

Fetch a nurse! Quick, man!

ASH WATCHMAN

Are you sick?

ASH

'Tis my daughter, she's worse.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

ASH WATCHMAN

Well? What can I do about it?

ASH

Fetch a nurse! By law you must do our necessary errands, and fetching a keeper is a Christian necessary!

ASH WATCHMAN

Oh, all right, all right.

[Exits.]

MRS. ASH

Now hurry!

[ASH flinging down cross, he and  
MRS. ASH run off.

ASH WATCHMAN enters with  
NURSE.]

ASH WATCHMAN

What the—! Zounds!

NURSE

Have your birds flown?

ASH WATCHMAN [to FOE at desk]

Sir, did you see this?

[Coughing, FOE turns away. ASH  
WATCHMAN and NURSE enter  
ASH house.]

BUCKINGHAM [off]

Bring out your dead!

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

[Pushes dead-cart on.]

Bring out your dead!

NURSE

Dead here!

[BUCKINGHAM halts. ASH  
WATCHMAN and NURSE place  
ASH DAUGHTER's body in dead-  
cart, NURSE taking ring.]

BUCKINGHAM

'Ere, give that ring to me.

NURSE

I saw it first.

ASH WATCHMAN

Half the value's mine.

NURSE

Mine. You never saw it.

BUCKINGHAM

Give it over.

NURSE [indicating body]

No, you don't, that's your prize.

[Exits bickering with ASH  
WATCHMAN.]

– A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR –

BUCKINGHAM

No wonder they call nurses keepers: Whatever they gets, they keeps. Ah, you're a pretty wench.

[Fondling body, pushes dead-cart off.]

Bring out your dead!

[FOE writes. JUDITH enters.]

FOE

Silk seller! How d'you fare? Come closer –

JUDITH

I go this way.

FOE

Come closer. Perhaps I wish to cheapen your silks.

JUDITH

Then you are out of luck, for of silks I have none, not since they stopped the shipping.

FOE

How do you live?

JUDITH

What's it to you?

FOE

I don't mean –

JUDITH

I know what you mean, what men always mean.

– A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR –

FOE [approaching]

No.

JUDITH [backing away]

Stay off me. Go back to your writing. Why do you write? Does writing stop it? No. Ease anyone's suffering? No. Save your friends? No!

FOE

My friends are where, if not here? If I can tell our story in accents that alarm the soul, I shall rejoice that I see these things and remember them.

JUDITH

I don't want to remember. I want to forget!

[Exits.]

FOE

Damn!

[Resumes writing.

FLASH as TYDINGS opens window.]

TYDINGS

Abraham! Abraham! Abraham!

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW [entering]

Abraham is dead, sir.

TYDINGS

Who are you?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW

His widow, sir.

TYDINGS

His—?

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW

I woke up this morning and found his jaw was fallen and his eyes were open. He was almost cold, sir.

TYDINGS

Why did you come out?

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW

I knew you would want him.

TYDINGS

But if he is dead, I must want him. You cannot help me, nor I you.

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW [holding out arms]

Oh sir, I am provided for—marked with the tokens. I shall not be long after my Abraham. In his place I have brought you an honest man.

[Enter THOMAS MOLINS.]

TYDINGS

How do I know he's not infected?

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW

He is one of the safe men, sir. He had it and recovered, so he cannot get it again.

TYDINGS [tossing coin]

Take this.



—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW

Thank you, sir.

TYDINGS

Tell me, why have the bells stopped? Is it almost finished?

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW

Why, the number that die is so great, they forbid the ringing of bells on anybody.

THOMAS MOLINS

The very bells are hoarse with tolling.

TYDINGS

Well, and what is this cry we hear but cannot make out?

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW

Cry?

TYDINGS

Every night, lately in the day as well. A man passes, bawling.

THOMAS MOLINS

I know, master: *Bring out your dead!*

[TYDINGS closes window firmly.]

*Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!*

[Settles beneath window.

ABRAHAM'S WIDOW exits.

HEATH emerges from  
MARTINDALE house.]

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MRS. MARTINDALE [at door]

Air is what I need, to walk in the sun.

HEATH

You shall have your freedom, Mrs. Martindale.

[EXAMINER emerges.]

You see there never was plague in this house.

EXAMINER

Last time I was wrong, I admit it, but 'tis a different matter now.

HEATH

*What?*

EXAMINER

The woman is scorbutic.

HEATH

Lack of air and exercise. Free them.

EXAMINER

Watchman, twenty-eight days more.

HEATH

No!

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

Yes, sir!

[Nails cross to door.]

HEATH

Death and damnation!

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MARTINDALE

Doctor Heath?

EXAMINER

I have my duty. If in four weeks she improves—

[Staggers.]

HEATH

How can she improve, when you shut her up?

EXAMINER

Doctor Heath, attend: What's the matter with me?

[HEATH peels back EXAMINER's  
shirt.]

HEATH

You are a dead man. Pray you have not killed this family.

MARTINDALE

What is it? What's the matter?

MRS. MARTINDALE

Doctor Heath?

[EXAMINER staggers off.  
FOE staggers on.]

FOE

Heath! How d'you fare?

HEATH

Foe? Told you to stay close—

–A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR –

FOE

Behold me a living monument of the Almighty's protection.

HEATH

Go in again.

FOE

I cannot quell my curiosity. I come back frightened, yet I cannot stay home. Indeed, I must see to my brother's hats in Swan Alley, for he left them in my care.

[HEATH exits, shaking head.]

NURSE [off, gaily]

Oh, death! Death! Death!

[Enters with SHOPPER, BOTH wearing multiple hats, carrying more.]

FOE

What business have you with these, mistress?

NURSE

No more than she.

FOE

What were you doing at William Foe's warehouse? Give me those hats!

NURSE

They're not for you!

SHOPPER [hatting FOE]

Oh yes, very becoming indeed. Ain't he pretty?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FOE

I shall lock you in and fetch the constable.

NURSE [revealing bandaged face]

That's right, lock up and come in with me. We'll have a toss.

FOE

Away! Get away from me!

[Slowly collapses. NURSE and SHOPPER exit laughing while BUCKINGHAM pushes on dead-cart, SOLOMON EAGLE, draped in gold, standing triumphant atop it.]

SOLOMON EAGLE

There he is, Buckingham! There's our prey: The untouchable, the safe Harry Foe at last!

BUCKINGHAM

I'd rather find a nice dead wench.

FOE

Me? Me? But I'm clean! I must be!

SOLOMON EAGLE

Clean? You can't know, and I don't believe it!

FOE

Who are you?

SOLOMON EAGLE

I am the plague, come to eat you up! I am famished for men!

[Takes hold of FOE.]

–A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR –

FOE [offering pages]

But my journal.

SOLOMON EAGLE [scattering pages]

A journal-keeper, are we? Let's scatter your dead leaves!

BUCKINGHAM [helping FOE onto cart]

Come with me. 'Tis easy, I do everything. That's it, always room for one more.

[On cart, JUDITH sits up.]

FOE

You!

JUDITH

And you.

FOE

We'll be together.

JUDITH [embracing BUCKINGHAM]

I'm with him now. I offered myself to you, but you –

BUCKINGHAM

Aye, women like a man who knows what he likes.

FOE

Please let's go back. I don't want to die!

BUCKINGHAM

You? You don't want to live – hiding your heart away like a jewel.

SOLOMON EAGLE

'Tis the only part of you not infected, Harry Foe.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

BUCKINGHAM

Call that living? Your kind's the bulk of my trade.

FOE

But I have no heart!

JUDITH

He speaks the truth.

SOLOMON EAGLE

Lie down, Harry, and shut up.

FOE

Thank you, I think I prefer to wait.

[Climbs down.]

You don't hinder me?

BUCKINGHAM

How? Life's not my domain.

FOE

Jump out! He can't hinder you!

JUDITH

Let's go on now.

BUCKINGHAM

Patience, my pretty.

SOLOMON EAGLE

What's your hurry? You've all eternity.

BUCKINGHAM [pushing dead-cart off]

Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

SOLOMON EAGLE

Back for you later, my dainty morsel! Oh dreadful God! Dreadful!

[FOE picks up pages as HEATH enters. Sounds of digging.]

HEATH

Foe!

FOE [jumping in fright]

I feel very well.

HEATH [hand to FOE's brow]

Come along home. I'll take you home.

FOE

Wait—

[BURIER and SEXTON shovel towards FOE.]

BURIER

You're early, gentlemen. Not open for business yet.

FOE

Oh Heath, what a terrible pit.

HEATH

Foe, let's go home.

BURIER

Help us, sir. Measure us your length. Lie down here, sir, for one moment.



—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FOE

Full forty foot in length, fifteen or sixteen broad, and — nine foot deep, do you make it?

HEATH

About that.

BURIER

Will be twenty, unless the water prevents us.

SEXTON

The water comes at seventeen or eighteen foot, Mr. Foe, and with the order to leave no bodies within six foot, it's dig, dig, dig.

FOE

Do you mean to bury the parish in this dreadful gulf?

BURIER

This hole? Couple days' worth. When 'tis stuffed full, we extend that way.

SEXTON

No, first over to the porch, then down —

BURIER [pointing at FOE]

Look! Death's in his face!

SEXTON

Keep digging. Dig, dig, dig!

[THEY resume digging.

HEATH escorts FOE across.]

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FOE

Heath, 'tis admirable how the authorities do. God keeps *me*, but their civil measures have sense, keeping the streets clear of dead bodies—

HEATH

Removed like dung, in the night.

FOE

And my Lord Mayor will not quit the city, no, he refuses, and built himself a platform on purpose to hear complaints at a safe distance.

HEATH

My Lord Mayor does much, but the dead-cart does more.

FOE [delirious]

Heath, on the other side of the grave we shall be brethren again: Why cannot we join heart and hand on this side?

HEATH

'Tis to be lamented.

FOE

But my notes?

HEATH

At home.

FOE

First I must go and see whereof to write—

HEATH

This way, Foe.

– A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR –

FOE

Death! I mean Heath! I am a dead man!

HEATH

You are not.

FOE

I'm sick!

HEATH [wiping FOE's face]

Men still fall sick of other things. You have fever. I'll put you to bed and bathe your head with vinegar.

[HEATH settling HIM, FOE recites  
Psalm 23:]

FOE

Heath, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me,  
Thy rod and thy staff – they comfort me.

[Kneeling, MOTHER SELKIRK and  
ESTHER SELKIRK flank DICK  
SELKIRK, who holds open Bible.]

DICK SELKIRK

Time is lapsed, death is at the door, and I have an ocean of sins to launch through.

ESTHER SELKIRK

If deferring repentance to the last gasp renders it suspect, yet it may be sincere.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MOTHER SELKIRK

Many a criminal is forgiven even at the gallows.

JOHN SELKIRK [entering]

I have tomorrow's bill. We must make up our minds. In St. Giles alone—

MOTHER SELKIRK

How do you have tomorrow's bill?

JOHN SELKIRK

'Tis brought to my Lord Mayor beforehand.

DICK SELKIRK

What, that they may alter the numbers?

JOHN SELKIRK

How can you say that?

DICK SELKIRK

I take nothing on faith—save for Jesus Christ my Savior.

JOHN SELKIRK

I was asleep not to lay in provisions.

ESTHER SELKIRK

We are all appointed to die, and after death to judgment.

JOHN SELKIRK

Esther, kindly ring no knells over us before we are dead.

DICK SELKIRK

Nay, sister, tell us, what is our duty?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

JOHN SELKIRK

Why, you are as bad as she is.

DICK SELKIRK

Bad? Would I were as good.

ESTHER SELKIRK

We must learn to die at the feet of Christ as penitents.

MOTHER SELKIRK

“For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible.”

DICK SELKIRK

The Book of — The Book of —

ESTHER SELKIRK

The Book of Joel, chapter two, verse two.

DICK SELKIRK

Chapter two, verse two.

MOTHER SELKIRK

The words of God Himself.

DICK SELKIRK

'Tis a call to us.

ESTHER SELKIRK

Directed to me.

DICK SELKIRK

To me in particular.

ESTHER SELKIRK

To *me*.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

JOHN SELKIRK

The words of Job: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

MOTHER SELKIRK, DICK SELKIRK, ESTHER SELKIRK

Hallelujah! Amen!

[Exit John Selkirk.]

DICK SELKIRK

Sister, what means Eight John fifty-one, that the faithful shall not see death?

ESTHER SELKIRK

That means death eternal. Natural death is not death, but only a change.

DICK SELKIRK

Madam, at a time when we see this — *change* — marching towards us, perhaps we ought to listen to my brother?

MOTHER SELKIRK

Now, son, when our graves open their mouths, we may rejoice that we believe.

JOHN SELKIRK [rushing in]

Madam! Esther! Dick! God has accomplished my preparations at last!

MOTHER SELKIRK

Thank you, Lord, for delivering this prodigal.

DICK SELKIRK

He means as to removing ourselves. Quick work, John.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MOTHER SELKIRK

I'll not be moved but to heaven.

ESTHER SELKIRK

Amen!

MOTHER SELKIRK

Come, my sons, let us pray!

DICK SELKIRK

John won't pray.

JOHN SELKIRK [kneeling]

Forgive my brother, Lord, his distrust of Thee and me!

MOTHER SELKIRK, ESTHER SELKIRK

Amen!

JOHN SELKIRK

And we thank Thee, Lord, for giving us in Captain Davis the means of surviving Thy righteous work of sweeping London with vengeance, purifying it for — for —

ESTHER SELKIRK

— for the habitation of Thy faithful.

MOTHER SELKIRK

Who is Captain Davis?

JOHN SELKIRK [calling]

Captain Davis?

[Enter CAPTAIN DAVIS.]

Madam, his coming is our deliverance.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MOTHER SELKIRK

How so?

CAPTAIN DAVIS

Have I not landed a ship? And is she not yours, except the sixteenth mine by your friendship? And has she not provisions aboard for twenty men for five months, but can take in no goods, for nobody can ship off anything?

JOHN SELKIRK

To the ship!

ESTHER SELKIRK

We're not ready!

DICK SELKIRK

I think — I think the Lord will forgive us if —

MOTHER SELKIRK

Let us pray —

JOHN SELKIRK

*Tomorrow*, madam: Captain Davis has appointed tomorrow a fast day — A week's strict fast begins on board ship *tomorrow*.

MOTHER SELKIRK

Captain Davis, is this so?

JOHN SELKIRK [prompting DAVIS]

A bread and water fast.

CAPTAIN DAVIS

Aye, madam, a bread and water fast.



—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MOTHER SELKIRK

In that case— In that case, I commit myself unto His hands: “The preparation of the heart is from the Lord.”

ESTHER SELKIRK

Proverbs, chapter sixteen, verse one—

[JOHN SELKIRK pulls HER off  
after MOTHER SELKIRK,  
CAPTAIN DAVIS and DICK  
SELKIRK following.

COMPANY enters between  
ASH and MARTINDALE houses.]

FOE [writing]

“My fever abating, I was left with the need and desire to give thanks—and to look for my friend, the silk seller.”

[Joins COMPANY.]

I therefore crowded with my neighbors into St. Giles Church—  
joined them in a pious service of prayers, sermons, and eulogies of  
those who had died.

[To MARTINDALE WATCHMAN:]

Have you seen the silk seller?

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

The silk seller?

FOE

Why did I put her off before?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

I thought you knew, Mr. Foe. The silk seller's—gone.

BUCKINGHAM

Our town has become Golgotha, the place of the skull! We have placed our faith in the Lord!

FOE

I heard how many friends I lost that week while exchanging uneasy glances with those pressing about me, some coughing, others scratching or sneezing, and when it came time to sing the Psalm of thanksgiving, my lips gave their service while my legs carried me out again. My knees were shaking.

[Crosses, meets JUDITH.]

You! I thought—too late!

JUDITH

Who knows? Still sound?

FOE

Who knows? There's a kind of—call it plague—inside me.

JUDITH [fondling FOE]

What kind is that? Oh yes, I know this kind.

[THEY kiss. FOE backs HER onto  
dead-cart and mounts HER while  
COMPANY sings Psalm 124:]

COMPANY

*If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,  
when men rose up against us:*

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

*Then they had swallowed us up quick,  
when their wrath kindled against us:  
Then the waters had overwhelmed us,  
the stream had gone over our soul:  
Blessed be the Lord, who hath not giv'n us as a prey to their teeth.  
Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers:  
The snare is broken, and we are escaped.  
Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and hell.*

[COMPANY disperses, JUDITH  
hurrying off while FOE comfortably  
makes HIS way home.

FLASH at TYDINGS' window.  
Lowers bucket.]

TYDINGS

Porter! Porter! Molins!

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

The man that stood at your door, sir, is dead of the plague.

TYDINGS

Him I had first is dead, but this is the new man.

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

Called Thomas Molins, was he not?

TYDINGS

No. . . That's right, Molins.

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

'Tis him I mean.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

TYDINGS

Why, that cannot be. He had it before, he cannot have it again. I merely wish the latest bill, and to know how fares the Court at Oxford.

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

Some have it three, four times that afterwards die of it. They carried poor Tom Molins to the pit last night. As for the king and his court, it has not so much as touched them—thank God! Here's the latest bill, sir—if you have some silver.

TYDINGS [tossing coin]

Oh all right. Fire it first.

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

That I will.

[Pours powder into bucket, fires it,  
holds paper in smoke.]

TYDINGS

Now vinegar.

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

Yes, sir.

[Sprinkles paper with vinegar.  
TYDINGS raises bucket.  
Enter GOOD TYDINGS.]

TYDINGS

Half burned. What I can make out: Dead of plague this week, eight thousand, two hundred and fifty-two.

– A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR –

GOOD TYDINGS

No improvement at all?

TYDINGS

Improvement? Why, yes: Of cancer, there died but one. Of apoplexy, I make out two only. Of grief – no, not one.

[GOOD TYDINGS causes FLASH.]

Close that window, sir.

GOOD TYDINGS

Not yet, sir, I want to look –

TYDINGS

No, sir. There is nothing to be seen, save that grass grows in the very street.

GOOD TYDINGS

Please, sir.

TYDINGS

Please yourself. I care not.

[Collapses.]

GOOD TYDINGS

Father! Mother!

MRS. TYDINGS [entering]

Husband! Give us more air, Good. Husband, we cannot endure confinement longer: No air, no exercise, no greens, no fruits.

TYDINGS

You would plunge out of doors – and die?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MRS. TYDINGS

To stay in is to die.

TYDINGS

I have read that on long sea voyages the juice of the lime is efficacious. You will find among my stores a barrel of it. We will drink of it daily—

GOOD TYDINGS

Have you tasted lime juice?

TYDINGS

—with sugar.

GOOD TYDINGS

Thank you, Father.

TYDINGS

Do not fret, madam. We are one thousand miles from London.

MRS. TYDINGS

He's out of his head!

GOOD TYDINGS

He has captained us thus far in safety, Mother. I will continue our voyage— for we shall survive.

[Causes FLASH, looks out, closes window.]

Enter SIR JOHN LAWRENCE.  
FOE drops to one knee, rebuffs red wand.]

FOE

But Lord Mayor—

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

SIR JOHN LAWRENCE

Mr. Foe—

FOE

To shut up the well with the ill is a kind of murder. It doesn't answer.

SIR JOHN LAWRENCE

But evidently you do.

FOE

'Tis hard to make me go against my judgment.

SIR JOHN LAWRENCE

I know you will do your duty as examiner.

[FOE accepts wand. Exit SIR JOHN LAWRENCE.

LIMPING MAN tipsily accosts FOE.]

LIMPING MAN

Harry Foe, in the city? They told me you got out.

FOE

They say the country's worse than the city. I stay safe here.

LIMPING MAN

I'm a sound man, too, and I will tell you why. Oh— the red stick.

FOE

My Lord Mayor summoned me to the Hall.

LIMPING MAN

Oh— the Hall.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FOE

Summoned me to swear me—to make me condemn to death those who are infected by shutting them up.

LIMPING MAN

Well?

FOE

Shutting up houses does not work. People fall ill at a greater rate than ever.

LIMPING MAN

Well, each must do what he can.

FOE

There's nothing I can do. I know people say God can keep us in the midst of danger—

LIMPING MAN

You say that.

FOE

So said thousands who have gone into the pit. I don't know whether you wish to earn any extra—

LIMPING MAN

In the way I think you mean? Not I, thank you.

[Enter ASH.]

Why, 'tis Mr. Ash. Come in, sir, welcome. We have not seen you this long while. Sit you down. Wife! Refreshment for Mr. Ash and Mr. Foe. And for me.

[Absently rubs leg.]



—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FOE

Well, sir, and your soundness? What preserves you?

LIMPING MAN

Why, when danger threatens, I unbutton my cordial!

[Unbuttons leather cordial-bottle,  
takes swig.]

And that is why I am a well man today.

[Offers to FOE, who refuses, and to  
ASH, who takes swig.]

FOE

But how do you know when danger threatens, when no man can see it?

LIMPING MAN [rubbing leg]

I praise the king.

FOE

We all may praise the king.

LIMPING MAN

Aye, but you did not fall at Naseby fighting for the king's father.

FOE

Well?

LIMPING MAN

Why, when I'm in company with those who are infected, be they sound to all appearance, my old wound smarts.

[Rubbing leg, rises.]

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

I then rise up and say: Friends, somebody in this room has the plague! And that breaks up the company, and that prevents infection, and I turn to my cordial and —

[Takes swig, sits down.]

Mr. Ash, you are quiet.

ASH

I am come to take my leave of you.

LIMPING MAN

Where are you going?

ASH

Going? Why, to my long house. I shall die tomorrow night. I have got the plague.

[LIMPING MAN and FOE leap  
away.]

Are you disturbed at me? Why then, I'll go home and die there.

[Exit ASH.]

LIMPING MAN

Wife! Burn pitch and gunpowder and sulphur! But not together!  
And scrub down the walls! And wash my clothes! I knew it! I knew  
it!

[Limps off, scrambling out of  
clothes. FOE goes to  
MARTINDALE house.]

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

Twenty-eight days already, sir?

FOE

How do they?

MARTINDALE WATCHMEN

Don't think on me, I can find another post in a minute.

MARTINDALE [at door]

Mr. Examiner, free us. 'Tis death to shut us in longer!

MRS. MARTINDALE

Death!

FOE

First I must inspect.

[MARTINDALE and MRS.  
MARTINDALE display  
THEMSELVES.]

MRS. MARTINDALE

I am well, Mr. Foe.

FOE

Happy to see it, Mrs. Martindale.

MARTINDALE

I am well also, Mr. Foe.

FOE

So you are, Mr. Martindale.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

MARTINDALE

But we need sunshine, fresh air.

[Groan within.]

FOE

Man, you have plague in this house! It must be shut up again!

MARTINDALE

No! You kill us!

MRS. MARTINDALE

He's only a servant boy!

FOE

I must! I'm sworn to!

[To MARTINDALE WATCHMAN:]

Twenty-eight days more.

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

Aye, sir, twenty-eight days it is.

MARTINDALE

You son of a bitch, Foe. Bloody whoreson shitsack!

MRS. MARTINDALE

Dung for the dungheap!

MARTINDALE

I hope it gets you and you die in agony. Agony!

MRS. MARTINDALE

I see plague sores on you! Running with dirty pus! *Pah!*

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

[Spits.]

MARTINDALE

You're for the worms, Harry Foe! For the worms!

[Crossing, FOE meets PICK.]

PICK

Well, well: the red stick. And how many of you here in St. Giles, Mr. Foe?

FOE

Eighteen examiners in St. Giles alone, Mr. Pick.

PICK

I don't envy you, going into infected places.

FOE

Oh, that is no concern, with the precautions Doctor Heath enjoins upon me, not that I presume to dictate to Him above—

PICK

Amen, amen, His will be done. What precautions?

FOE

Garlic and licorice are sovereign against it.

PICK

Everyone knows that.

FOE

No, 'tis necessary work, Mr. Pick, for our safety depends upon shutting up the sick, but my business needs attention, so I want to find a neighbor to take my place.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

PICK

You should shut up all the sick, all who converse promiscuously with the sick, and all who are infected, and be done with it. Do that and no sound person could fall ill.

FOE

But 'tis propagated insensibly, Mr. Pick, by those not visibly infected.

PICK

Self-preservation is the first law, Mr. Foe. They should be shut up, shut up and watched—for they break out, you know.

FOE

I know.

PICK

Well, and does any emolument attach to this office?

FOE

No—

PICK

Oh, well, then.

FOE

—but in gratitude to a man willing to fill my place, I shall reward him ten pounds.

PICK

Ten pounds?

FOE

Ten guineas, Mr. Pick.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

PICK

Still I wonder how safe can it be, day in, day out, to go near the sick?

FOE

You might as well ask, is it safe here?

PICK

Oh, we are secure here. I have been cautious since the first rumor. I have not come near anyone sick all this time. Not one.

FOE

Hard to say, when men alive and well one hour are dead the next.

PICK

That is true, but I have not been with any person there has been any danger in. Not one.

FOE

No? Was not you at the Bull Head Tavern with Mr. Heyward night before last?

PICK

Yes, I was, but there was nobody dangerous there. Why, Mr. Heyward is not dead, is he?

[FOE rises.]

Then I am a dead man too.

FOE

I must shut you up, Mr. Pick.

[Leads PICK off.]

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

BUCKINGHAM [pushing dead-cart on]

Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!

[Weeping NURSE sets down tiny coffin, exits.]

What's this — firewood?

[Dumps body in cart and breaks coffin, lofts lumber.]

Faggots! Faggots! Five for sixpence, good green faggots!

MARTINDALE WATCHMAN

Dead here!

BUCKINGHAM [knocking]

Bring out your dead, bring out your dead!

[Helps MARTINDALE  
WATCHMAN load MRS.  
MARTINDALE's body.  
MARTINDALE follows.

Meanwhile, followed by  
BUCKINGHAM, FOE crosses to  
where SEXTON and BURIER dig.]

FOE

Sexton—

SEXTON

Mr. Foe?



—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FOE

Admit me, Sexton: I am pressed in my mind to see what might be an instructing sight.

SEXTON

Nay then, name of God, come in. 'Twill be a sermon to you, for 'tis a speaking sight. Burier, you missed a foot.

[MARTINDALE wails.]

BURIER

Made him walk, did you? Refused him the last ride?

BUCKINGHAM

Nay, he is sound, only I have his wife and children.

MARTINDALE [kneeling]

My wife. My children.

SEXTON

Now don't stay here.

BUCKINGHAM

Some girls in here, Sexton, virgin till now, if I don't mistake.

SEXTON

And for eternity, Mr. Buckingham. Into my pit you cannot come.

BUCKINGHAM

Saving them for yourself?

[Pushes dead-cart off.]

MARTINDALE

My wife! My children!

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

SEXTON

In the pit, are they?

BURIER

Why don't you leap in the pit? Leap on your wife and go to heaven?

FOE

Cannot you see the man's sorrow? Decent men should respect it.

BURIER

You be quiet.

SEXTON

And why are you not at home praying against the dead-cart?

BURIER

Mayhap 'tis too late: He looks peaked and blotchy.

SEXTON

He's for our pit in earnest.

FOE

I am preserved that I might prevent you jeering at a man whom death makes mute and disconsolate.

MARTINDALE

Why, 'tis Mr. Examiner. 'Tis Harry Foe!

FOE

I speak calmly from consciousness of what is due a merciful God—

MARTINDALE

'Tis *you* made my family sick! *You* put my wife and my children into the pit!

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

BURIER

Preach at *us*, will you!

SEXTON

Marked out special by God?

BURIER

Call upon your God?

[SEXTON and BURIER attack FOE,  
who flees, pulling MARTINDALE.]

FOE [kneeling]

I mind not your drollery, for I know He will single you out.  
Though 'tis no certain rule to judge of anyone's eternal state by  
their dying of plague, I know He will not spare enemies that insult  
and mock Him, but will tumble them into the muck pit, undermost  
of all, bruised and pressed with tenscore dead above!

MARTINDALE

No! 'Tis not His judgment on my good wife, my sweet babies! Not  
so! Not so!

[Pummels unresisting FOE, scatters  
manuscript, exits.

HEATH enters as FOE picks up  
pages, breaks wand on knee.]

FOE

Ah, Heath, I got your summons. A welcome prospect company is,  
too, for around us only death. We draw in death when we breathe.  
I need an evening's refuge.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

HEATH

There is no refuge from London's hell, unless journal-writing be prophylactic.

FOE

It takes me away from the horrors I have seen. That is, permits me to face them, for a time.

HEATH

And you write them down?

FOE

I cannot stop myself. I look and write, look closer and write more.

HEATH

You have seen what is not good to see, but good to remember.

FOE

Nothing that everyone does not see.

HEATH

You perceive it in its parts and proportions. 'Tis yours to tell the story of this time that is not to be paralleled in history.

FOE

Write how God betrayed us, and ignored us, played with us, abandoned us?

HEATH

Write it down.

FOE

How some die and others live?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

HEATH

Put it down, what it was when it happened.

FOE

'Tis no chronicle of two kings jousting.

HEATH

No, not of two kings.

FOE

Nor of men fighting in battle for their nation.

HEATH

True, no human enemy's engaged.

FOE

Nor is it the story of a man and woman.

HEATH

Nor yet of a man and woman.

FOE

'Tis a story of nothing but fear and sickness and death, of loss without shape, without meaning, without solace, without end.

HEATH

That's it. Let it not be without remembrance, however. Write it down, Foe: A plague's the proper mirror for mankind. I have been more fortunate than you in laying down my responsibility.

FOE

How do you mean?

HEATH

I am within the two hours, I think.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FOE

Did I mistake my time?

HEATH

So soon as the tokens appeared, I sent to you.

FOE

Is it your servant? I will find her space in the pest house, I swear it—

HEATH

'Tis not my servant.

FOE

Not your wife—?

HEATH

Not my wife.

FOE

Thank God. Who then?

HEATH

The young men teach me, Foe. They are strangely borne up against the disease, less troubled themselves than others are troubled for them. This morning I attended a sweet, loving youth. In his sickness he had much quiet upon his spirit. He lay so unconcerned that I marveled, and he went away to his father's house with great peace. I could not blame the mother's grief for the loss of such a son, but to be immoderate was not well. Now 'tis time to dry up tears and lay aside sorrow for those filled with joy in the heavenly mansions.

[Produces walnut.]

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

And I have this.

FOE

What's that?

HEATH

A walnut filled with quicksilver.

FOE

You called such charms superstition.

HEATH

Against miasmata invisible, effluvia unseen? They must live floating upon the air, in the interstices of the aerial particles, conveyed from one to another as words are conveyed from mouth to ear, by the vibration of the air. I wrote this out for you.

[Holds out receipt.]

I took it just now with great relief.

FOE [reading]

"Take burnt hartshorn half an ounce, the black tops of crabs' claws an ounce and a half" —

HEATH

You may take it with more faith than unicorn's horn, which at five pounds the ounce only the rich may buy — What a sink of filthiness is the body of man. The sink and receptacle of filth. No wonder He has had His fill of us.

FOE

Heath, 'tis not His judgment. To image the vengeful father bending His bow and loosing arrows of death against us is as superstitious as — as ignoring precaution and lodging at the brink of the pit.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

HEATH [backing away]

Or as embracing a dead man.

[Countryside. Sounds of a river.  
FOE crosses, eating apple.]

FOE

A plague is armed with terrors not every man is fortified against, but to stay as my particular friend Doctor Heath stayed was like charging Death himself on his pale horse. . . What a sight: London drawn not to the life, but to the death.

[Writes.]

Not bad. Curious, in this plague no alteration appears in any vegetable or animal besides the body of man. Other things keep their integrity: Plums, pears, cherries, apples—

[Bites apple.]

Plentiful, and so sweet.

[Enter ROBERT, who sees FOE,  
stops.]

Come ahead, I am sound.

[ROBERT stands still.]

How do the people hereabouts? Not so bad as in the city, is it?

ROBERT

Alas, sir! All dead or sick.

[Points.]



—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

There they are dead and the house stands open. A thief ventured in, but he paid dear: Last night they carried him to the pit. There they are dead, the man, his wife, five children. There they are shut up. See the watchman at the door? There too, all dead. We are poor, and this they call the poor man's plague.

FOE

What do you here alone?

ROBERT

Why, I am not yet visited, though my family is, and my daughter dead.

FOE

How do you mean, then, you are not visited?

ROBERT

Why, that's my house. My poor wife and sons are visited, but I do not come at them.

FOE

How can you abandon your flesh and blood?

ROBERT

I don't abandon them. I work for them and keep them from want.

FOE

Well, but how are you kept from the calamity?

ROBERT

I am a waterman, sir. There's my boat. I work in it in the day and sleep in it at night. What I get I lay down upon that stone and my Rachel comes and fetches it.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FOE

How can you get money as a waterman? Nobody goes by water these times.

ROBERT

Do you see there, five ships lying at anchor? And eight or ten riding above the chain, two by two? Those ships have their owners on board. I fetch things for them, that they may not be obliged to come on shore. 'Tis a very fine sight!

FOE

Are they safe?

ROBERT

Every tide carries bodies. I seldom step on shore here. I am come now only to give my Rachel a little money.

FOE

And how much hast thou gotten for her?

ROBERT

Four shillings. 'Tis on the plague stone. I am waiting for her. Poor woman! Her swelling is broke and I hope she will recover, but I fear the children will die, but 'tis the Lord—

[RACHEL enters, weeping as SHE exchanges look with ROBERT.]

FOE

Did she find your four shillings?

ROBERT

Rachel: Did you take the money, Rachel?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

RACHEL [picking up money]

Yes.

ROBERT

How much is it?

RACHEL

Four shillings and a groat.

[Exits.]

FOE

Friend, call thy Rachel again, and give her a little more comfort from me.

ROBERT [calling]

Rachel— Thank you, sir.

FOE [holding out coin]

Well, but here 'tis.

ROBERT

Oh sir, if you would place it on the ground, sir, that I may—

[FOE puts coin on ground, backs away. ROBERT carries coin to stone, backs away as RACHEL enters.]

RACHEL

Kind sir, thank you.

ROBERT

Thank you, sir.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

[RACHEL takes money, exits  
weeping. Exit ROBERT.]

FOE [throwing apple]

Son of a bitch.

[JUDITH, MRS. ASH, ASH  
DAUGHTER drag trunk on, take  
out silks, drape ONE ANOTHER,  
dance laughing in a ring.]

How it was brought over to us never was known, at least not publicly. It was rumored to have come over in a parcel of silks imported from Holland and opened in a house in Drury Lane. In that first house the first person died.

[Dancers toss silks.]

Her neighbor came to visit, then went home, gave it to her family and died.

[Toss.]

A minister came to pray with those of the second house and immediately he got home, he died.

[Toss.]

And so on. From that house in Drury Lane spread the plague that carried away a quarter or more of London.

BUCKINGHAM [off]

Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

[Dancers drop silks. MRS. ASH and  
ASH DAUGHTER run off.]

FOE

In September the weekly bills topped ten thousand. Death raged in every corner. They died by heaps and were buried by heaps. But then the case altered. With the first chill of fall, the poison went out of the sting. Tokens dried up and went away, inflammations went down, fevers ended.

[Sees JUDITH.]

You.

JUDITH

You.

FOE

What's your name?

JUDITH

What's it to you?

FOE

Much. Come over here. How do you?

JUDITH [not moving]

I'm alive, I don't know why.

FOE

'Tis my fortune also, to live.

JUDITH

Why?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FOE

I don't know. I was without armor. Naked before this onslaught.

JUDITH

How can we live without armor?

FOE

We cannot live in armor. To live is to live disarmed and innocent. There is no safety. I am without armor, and inside of me—

JUDITH

Stop.

FOE

But inside of me my heart is dark, abandoned, half dead, not assured of survival.

JUDITH

Then we are fellows. But cannot light enter in?

FOE

This I have learned, that the living, they have to live.

JUDITH

My name is Judith.

FOE

Judith.

[THEY kiss.

JOHN SELKIRK and  
ESTHER SELKIRK enter.  
BUCKINGHAM enters opposite,  
pushing wagon piled with clothing,  
and begins to pick up silks.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

FLASH at TYDINGS' window.]

TYDINGS

Selkirk! What news?

JOHN SELKIRK

Tydings, good news: The plague is finished!

GOOD TYDINGS [rushing upstairs]

What news?

TYDINGS

We have arrived!

[Emerges downstairs, MRS.

TYDINGS and GOOD TYDINGS  
following.]

ESTHER SELKIRK

'Tis life to us from the grave, but alas! More Sabbath-breaking takes place than before we heard God's voice in the city.

JOHN SELKIRK

We survived, Esther. Don't make me regret it.

BUCKINGHAM [bitterly]

What an alteration!

TYDINGS

'Tis wonderful. 'Tis a dream!

[Picks up silks.]

Somebody's left a lot of property strewn about. Sir, are these your fabrics?

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

BUCKINGHAM

Yes, they are!

MRS. TYDINGS

Air! The sun! Have we survived?

GOOD TYDINGS

Yes, Mother, we made it through.

MRS. TYDINGS

Your father did it. He brought us through.

GOOD TYDINGS

We still living. So many dead.

FOE

It was unlooked for, extraordinary, and no account can be given of it. The plague was over.

[Steps around BUCKINGHAM and  
TYDINGS tugging at silks.]

TYDINGS

That's mine!

BUCKINGHAM

Mine!

TYDINGS

Give it me, plague take you!

MRS. TYDINGS

No new medicine stopped the infection, no skill of the physicians:  
Human help and human skill were at an end.



—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

ESTHER SELKIRK

Nothing could have stopped it but

[raises forefinger]

the immediate finger of God.

[JUDITH looks up intently.]

FOE

What do you see?

JUDITH [pointing]

Oh, I see a portent—I see it plain!

FOE

What is it?

JUDITH

There above: A dark cloud. 'Twill rain today.

[FIDDLER playing, MRS. TYDINGS  
and ESTHER SELKIRK dance.]

MRS. TYDINGS, ESTHER SELKIRK

*Ring around a-rosy,  
Pocketful of posy,  
Ashes, ashes,  
We all fall down!*

[ESTHER SELKIRK falls down,  
kneels in prayer, ignoring  
BUCKINGHAM's helping hand.]

TYDINGS

'Tis a hungry city, Selkirk. I smell opportunity.

—A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR—

JOHN SELKIRK

My ship embarks in three days' time.

JUDITH

What if it come again?

FOE

*If, Judith? When.*

GOOD TYDINGS

Mr. Foe, join the celebration! 'Tis over!

FOE

Over till it come again!

[COMPANY freezes, exit one by one, leaving onstage FOE and JUDITH.]

Fire follows plague. Within nine months, from a spark struck in a baker's house in Pudding Lane, I see the city purged by a fire that burns so fiercely the citizens give up. All this

[gestures over audience]

I see dancing in towers of flame, then lying in ashes.

JUDITH

Will you come to bed? Who knows what will happen?

FOE

But if it come again, it will end also.

JUDITH

Does your work never end?

–A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR –

FOE [at desk]

I'm almost finished.

[Writes:]

“What the agent of infection was –”

JUDITH [tiptoeing off]

Agent of infection!

FOE [writing]

“What the agent of infection was never will be known. Some say if a sick man breathes upon glass, a strong lens can make out monstrous tiny dragons. But we only know, whatever the shape of the agent, its size was no bigger than a flea.

“I can go no farther here. I shall conclude my account of this calamitous year, therefore, with a coarse but sincere stanza of my own:

*A dreadful plague in London was  
In the year of sixty-five,  
Which swept an hundred thousand souls  
Away – yet I alive!”*

[Holds up page. As it bursts into flame and floats off, FOE eagerly follows JUDITH off.]

[END OF PLAY]

Excerpted from:

A Journal of the Plague Year, and Other Plays and Adaptations

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## Author's Preface (*excerpt*)

I'm a novelist who started out a playwright. When I moved to Manhattan in 1978, I promptly fell in love with theatre, and by the time I moved on in 1994 had seen hundreds of plays, and written all but one of these below. (Naturally, since leaving New York, I've seen only a handful.)

. . . Meanwhile AIDS came in and took over. I first heard about an unknown disease killing a handful of gay men in hospitals across Manhattan from a medical-resident friend in the summer of 1980, a year before the famous *New York Times* article of July 3, 1981. But soon enough that distant drumbeat of doom was banging away right in front of my face and everybody else's, and indiscriminately taking friends, lovers, enemies, acquaintances, friends of friends, colleagues and teachers.

*A Journal of the Plague Year*

Adapting Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* for the stage seemed a natural response. I don't know how many read his classic these days (surely a graphic novel of it would sell?), but it's a terrific book, throbbing with life however saturated by death. Defoe was a little boy in 1665 when bubonic plague killed a quarter of the people of his London. In 1721, as another epidemic

threatened, the old man called on his memory and vivid commercial instincts to write two plague books.

The rarer one, which I luckily stumbled across at the New York Public Library, is *Due Preparations for the Plague*. In dialogue form, it follows the divergent strategies of two families (the play's Tydings and Selkirk families) in the face of the epidemic, replete with windy injunctions to *pray, pray, pray*. At least *Due Preparations* gave Defoe a place to stash the pieties that might otherwise have marred his other plague book, so largely free of them.

That second book, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, purports to be the journal of one "H.F.," a Whitechapel saddler who, seeing the plague sweep into his city, feels compelled to view and record its horrors. He patrols London and returns home to write up his "ordinary memorandums," depending less on prayer to survive than on the practical sanitary precepts of his physician friend Dr. Heath. But it seems that his forays in search of journal material help preserve him, too, almost as if Defoe offers up H.F.'s experience as a paradigm for the writer's life: living always in plague time, able to rely on himself only (shades of *Robinson Crusoe*), surviving so as to make an ultimately honest accounting: "Yet I *alive!*"

Other sources for my adaptation were *Loimologia; or, an Historical Account of the Plague in London in 1665*, by Nathaniel Hodges (ca. 1666), *God's Terrible Voice in the City*, by Thomas Vincent (ca. 1666) and *The Great Plague in London 1665*, by Walter George Bell (1924).

In 1993, The New York Theatre Workshop kindly gave the play a reading, directed by Michael Petshaft, with Darryl Theirse reading Foe and the participation of Rinne Groff, Paul Harris, Roberta Levine, Bruce Katzman, Molly Powell, Brian Keane, Martin

Moran and—fresh from snuggling under a blanket with Madonna during breaks in filming her *Bad Girl* video, in which he played a detective—Frank Raiter. The actors were excellent but—entirely owing to my script as it then was—the reading flatter than a pancake. James Nicola, NYTW’s Artistic Director, advised me to concentrate on Defoe’s hints that the government knew more about the plague than it cared to let on (“*There’s your play!*”); I disagreed. The reading’s great result was that it enabled me to see how to make the script dimensional—how to raise the play up from print to action.

I’m grateful to Charas/El Bohio Community Center—that remarkable institution (now unfortunately defunct) that for more than twenty years squatted in an abandoned schoolhouse between East Ninth and Tenth Streets (on my old block!)—for producing *A Journal of the Plague Year* as an Actors’ Equity Showcase in 1994. (And I was delighted to meet there a board member, the fine actor and movie star Luis Guzman.)

We rehearsed in an upstairs classroom during the incomparable month of May, the old school building charged with activity, the neighborhood’s very atmosphere electric—so different from when I’d lived there fifteen years earlier. One evening we witnessed a confrontation on Ninth Street between FBI agents and the priest who, to this day, is said to harbor millions from an armored-car heist. In cosmic irony as we rehearsed our play about plague and terror, the World Trade Center was a presiding presence, soaring up seemingly just outside our windows.

Our audiences laughed and cried, making the run a success in every way that counts. The cast was superb. Gino Montesinos played Foe, Katherine Sandberg was Judith; Ben Soto, Heath, with Claudia Arenas (Esther Selkirk), James K. Wuensch (Tydings),

Emily Lester (Mrs. Tydings), John E. Slagle (John Selkirk) and Timothy Durkin (Martindale). Russell Hodgson designed and ran the evocative lighting, Sang-Jin Lee designed and sourced the exquisite costumes (Kyung-Ah Kang was Costume Assistant) and John E. Slagle, again, built ingenious and effective sets and props. David Paul composed haunting themes in period dance rhythms, which violinists Karen Hansen and Sara Parkins improvised upon in performance. Stage Manager Kirsten E.C. Haussermann was also, one weekend, an actor's game and capable fill-in, and, with Carrie P. Haussermann (Technical Staff), incomparably deft at helping with the actors' quick changes. Charas's Roberto Badillo, Carlos Baez, Robin Michaels, Ulla Neuerburg, Alexander Perez, Ali Perez, Fabiana Reyez, Richard Velez and Executive Director Carlos Chino Garcia contributed to the production's success. Helpful criticism of the script came from Gary Bird, Anthony Brazile, Peter Brickelbank, Linda Chapman, Bettina Drew, Rob Glasser, Norman Kelvin, Tony Phelan, Bruce Phemister, Frank Rouda, Glen Sparer, Lizabeth Spires, and especially Albert F. Pesant, as well as from my parents, Jean Meyers and Harold Burton Meyers, who, with Sheila Meyers and Terry Meyers, also generously helped underwrite the production. The scheduled director pulling out at the last minute, I directed. The late Armando Perez, Charas's Artistic Director and the play's producer, declared it the best thing Charas ever did.

. . . It was not any lack of commercial success that caused me to abandon playwriting in favor of writing novels (no more am I discouraged by my novels' commercial failure), but my discovery that fiction better enables my peculiar gift of writing characters out to make sense of the world by telling themselves stories. Early in 1996 I began writing a novel, *Queer's Progress*, whose first draft was an expansive epic in three voices. And that was it; home at last.



But of course the plays, too, feature characters who tell themselves stories: Harry Foe in *Plague Year* impresses narrative over the chaos of his experience and apparently thus saves himself.

..

Life is so inchoate, so unpredictable – and always so cheap – it’s no wonder some of us look to storytelling for a semblance of order and structure; some solace, too. I write this in America’s hollowed-out, small-town heartland in January 2019 just seven days after hearing voices raised outdoors and looking out my study window to see a 17-year-old boy get shot three times: *pom-pom-pom*. Like I said, chaotic, random, cheap.

Reading plays is seldom a pleasure, because that’s not what they’re made for. But what can I do but offer up mine in paper and ink and electrons?

S.K.M.